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-Sam Zagoria

News About The CIA

The Central Intelligence Agency, which is supposed to quietly gather information and carry out limited covert activity, has found itself in unexpected prominence on Page 1 of newspapers around the world in recent weeks.

First there was the defection of a prize KGB official and, later, his leap back to the Soviets. There was also disclosure of a CIA plan to enlist other countries in toppling Libya's Muammar Qaddafi. The events have revived questions about the uneasy relations among the CIA, the press and Congress—sometimes at sword's point, sometimes as allies.

When The Washington Times disclosed in September that one of Russia's top agents had come over to the United States, there was much buzzing about what information he had brought with him, particularly about any "moles" in the United States. Almost immediately Edward Lee Howard, a former CIA officer accused of spying for the Soviet Union, disappeared and was believed to have made a clean getaway. Did the story alert him that his time was up?

I find it hard to believe that Soviet roll calls failed to notice for several weeks that Vitaly Yurchenko was an absentee. Surely the Russians don't have to rely on The Washington Times to send warnings to their spy network.

But how did the story develop? Was it pick-and-shovel digging? Or could it have been because the agency was eager to tell the world that it was doing a great job, that the prospect of freedom and good living were still successful lures? Or was it intended partially as a reminder to administration summit planners that this is a hard and uncertain world?

Ombudsman

The summit is now over, but there is still speculation about the effect of the leaking of Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger's letter to President Reagan on Soviet violations of arms control agreements. There is suspicion that the publicity stiffened Reagan resistance to any compromising. Who leaked it? Since it apparently helped the Weinberger position, was it someone on his side? Or was it someone on the other side who wanted to start a backfire? When The New York Times and The Post disclosed the content, they were careful to shield their source.

Early this month th[illegible]as back on Page 1 when Post r[illegible] Bob Woodward told of an agency plan to pull down Muammar Qaddafi. The 2½-column report had so much detail, readers may have wondered whether it had to be dug out piece by piece, or whether it had been handed over in a plain envelope still warm from the copying machine.

AS PUBLISHED

Was it an effort by the CIA to show that it was on top of the terrorism problem, or was it a leak by a CIA critic concerned that the plan involved the United States as a possible accessory to assassination, a violence forbidden by Reagan administration executive order?

Unfortunately for readers, reporters do not bite the hand that feeds them information about what the government is doing, nor do they want to tip off the identity. In this case there was more to-do about who leaked than about the rightness or wrongness of the policy. One Post letter writer said the Woodward story alerted Col. Qadaffi. Another letter said Col. Qaddafi was born in Libya, but wasn't born yesterday.

The Post was quiet for 13 days, but then came a defense from the managing editor, Leonard Downie Jr., deep inside a story on congressional criticism of the CIA. He said the Woodward story threw light on a hotly debated issue within the agency and congressional oversight committees and that the debate was "significant" because it dealt with "the whole question of what kinds of covert operations the CIA should engage in." Mr. Downie disclosed that none of the official sources asked that the story be withheld.

Readers would have been better served if this information had been included in the original Woodward report or conveyed in the form of a "Clarification" soon after publication.

Some editors are comfortable with secrecy labels; they never look twice. Others are concerned that a secrecy tag may hide information embarrassing to officials, rather than endangering the nation. Past events have shown they were right.

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